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REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON ITS TWENTY-SEVENTH SESSION

Draft report

Addendum

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Chapter ___. STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL COOPERATION

1. The Commission considered item 3 of its agenda at its 452nd, 455th and 456th meetings, on 22 and 24 February 1993. It had before it the following documents:

(a) Report of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination on its fourteenth session (E/CN.3/1993/2);

(b) Report of the Secretary-General containing comments on the recommendations and decisions contained in the report of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination on its fifteenth session, work done and additional action required for implementation (E/CN.3/1993/3 and Add.1);

(c) Report of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination on its fifteenth session (E/CN.3/1993/21);

(d) Report of the Secretary-General on the proposed programme of work of the Statistical Division for the biennium 1994-1995 and revisions to the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 (E/CN.3/1993/25);

(e) Note by the Secretariat containing the proposed programme of work of the Statistical Division for 1994-1995 and related information (E/CN.3/1993/CRP.1);

(f) Programme 24 (Statistics) of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 (A/45/6/Rev.1);

(g) Revisions to the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997, programme 24 (Statistics) (A/47/6/(Prog. 24)).

2. The Commission expressed its thanks to the independent Review Group, the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination and the international organizations for the work which had resulted in the decisions and recommendations set out in the Working Group's report on its fifteenth session (E/CN.3/1993/21, annex II). The Commission noted that that process had fulfilled a large number of the expectations resulting from the discussion of the matter at the twenty-sixth session of the Commission.

3. During a wide-ranging general discussion, the Commission was of the opinion that the global statistical system could best be defined in terms of the units or elements that comprised it and the various interrelationships among them. In such a system, there would be no single hierarchy of units or entities. The Commission identified the following elements as described by the Working Group: the Statistical Commission, its Working Group, the regional intergovernmental statistical bodies, the national statistical offices, the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat, the statistical services of the specialized agencies of the United Nations system and other international organizations and bodies such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Statistical Office of the European Communities, the statistical services of other parts of the United Nations Secretariat, including the United Nations regional commissions and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. The Working Group recognized that there well might be other units in the system as well (E/CN.3/1993/21, para. 76). The Commission confirmed that it was essential that the System focus its efforts, in a revitalized framework of cooperation, towards overall statistical development, under the direction of a strengthened Statistical Commission and Working Group, and with an enhanced regional dimension. This would promote more efficient use of the limited resources available for statistical work at the national and international levels. The Commission noted that concrete results had already been achieved, and that enhanced cooperative attitudes and arrangements had developed in the international organizations. The Commission called for the recommendations and decisions contained in the report of the Working Group to be implemented as soon as possible.

4. The Commission considered that development of international statistical arrangements must be inclusive, giving all countries the opportunity to participate fully, and must recognize differences in statistical capacities among countries. Participation in the work of the Commission and its Working Group provided such an opportunity. The Commission agreed that an enhanced regional dimension in the System, with well functioning links with the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat (UNSTAT) and other international organizations was called for. In particular, this would involve the recognition and strengthening of the role of regional statistical conferences and the regional statistical divisions, and would be particularly appropriate given the increasing regionalization of economic activities. It would also promote country participation in the System, additional cooperation

and strengthening of the national and regional elements of the international system.

5. The Commission considered that, in looking at the System, it was important to determine the overall tasks of the System, identify the organizations involved and their relative skills and capacities, promote allocation of tasks, both functionally and geographically consistent with those characteristics, establish a time-frame for action and a system for monitoring and reporting progress. This would represent a pragmatic short-term approach to helping the System become more efficient. In the longer term, a rethinking of the overall organizational arrangement of the System and its elements might be attempted. A number of elements for alternative approaches to organizational structure and operational methods were suggested, including simplifying the structures and the overall System and expanding the use of flexible and pragmatic decisions aimed at reducing duplication of work. In any approach to improving the operation of the System, the autonomous nature of the international agencies with their own governing bodies was recognized by the Commission.

6. The Commission agreed that it needed better information on what the System was doing and on the collective priorities of the System, in order to carry out its overall responsibilities more effectively. It decided that an integrated report on the statistical programmes of the organizations involved, broadening the reports currently compiled by UNSTAT in cooperation with the agencies, would attempt to fill the information gap. The Commission also decided that it was important to address the substance of what was being done by the System. The sectoral approach adopted and the task forces established by the Working Group were supported. The Commission noted that duplication could be assessed within regions by a review of work plans of the regional organizations, using recent developments in the European region as a model.

7. The Commission agreed that a number of tools, when further developed, would facilitate its task, namely a classification system to permit a clearer presentation of the activities of the System by subject and up-to-date directories and inventories describing those activities. Through such tools, the combined activities of all the organizations would become more apparent to the Commission and the organizations themselves, especially overlaps and gaps in activities. Examples of these tools, already at various stages of development by UNSTAT and the agencies, included the reports on integrated performance and plans before the Commission (E/CN.3/1993/22 and E/CN.3/1993/23), the Directory of International Statistics which, although it required updating, contained a useful initial classification of statistical subject-matters, and the inventory of statistical data collection activities (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.7).

8. Several additional points related to overall statistical development and cooperation were made. For example, (a) a core framework of standards was needed but with provision for flexible implementation; (b) greater assistance was needed in the implementation of United Nations standards in developing countries and the countries in transition; (c) publications and other forms of dissemination should be reviewed, in particular to identify and avoid duplication of collection of data; and (d) expanded cooperation between UNSTAT and regional statistical bodies was desirable.

9. The Commission took note of planned activities of the International Statistical Institute that were considered relevant to long-term statistical organization.

10. The Commission reviewed the recommendations and decisions of the Working Group as set out in annex II of the report on its fifteenth session (E/CN.3/1993/21). The comments, agreements, reservations and clarifications of the Commission are set out below (see paras. 27-45 for the texts of the recommendations and decisions).

Recommendation 1

11. The Commission broadly supported the recommendation that the Commission should meet more frequently if necessary. It would therefore be able to exercise better its leadership responsibilities in providing guidance and evaluation of international statistical work in the face of rapid change affecting statistical matters and would provide for continuity of participation by members. The Commission recognized that its influence was achieved through moral suasion and that more frequent meetings would allow this form of leadership to be more effective. Some representatives considered that an annual schedule should be adopted; others considered that annual meetings were not necessary but that they would be recommended as the specific need arose. That need could be established by reviewing the problems to be addressed and developing a programme of action. There was a general consensus that an annual meeting should be shorter than a biennial one and that alternative kinds of agendas and documentation, and procedural changes in the conduct of sessions would enable the Commission to be more focused on a limited number of broad strategic priority issues. The Commission recognized that annual meetings would have cost implications for international organizations and national statistical offices. The point was made, however, that the additional costs could be outweighed by the savings from reduced duplication. It was recognized that more frequent Commission sessions (and Working Group sessions if that were decided upon also) would need to be considered in the context of the overall schedule of international statistical meetings.

12. The Commission recognized that the objectives of providing leadership and continuity could also be served by more extensive communication through electronic media, and noted that international organizations were applying such forms of communication to facilitate cooperation. The Commission agreed that by giving an expanded role to a strengthened Working Group, meeting annually, with an enhanced regional involvement, more continuous leadership could be provided to the System.

Recommendation 2

13. The Commission noted that there might be technical difficulties in implementing some aspects of this recommendation and requested the Working Group to address possible difficulties to allow the fullest implementation. In particular, difficulties in nominating officers for the forthcoming session at the end of a current session were recognized.

Recommendation 3

14. The Commission stressed that the Working Group should meet more frequently as a basic element of its functioning and that of the Commission, as the need clearly existed on a continuing basis. The Commission welcomed the extensive work already accomplished by the Working Group and decided that it should be strengthened on a permanent basis and take on an even more comprehensive catalytic and continuous role in coordination of the System. This would involve establishing better working methods and tools for presenting the necessary information to the Working Group and the Commission on the work of the System. It was suggested that the Working Group deal with technical matters and prepare decisions for the Commission so that the Commission could concentrate more on policy issues. More frequent meetings of the Working Group, more contact between the Working Group and the Commission as a whole and more contact between the Working Group with other organizations would facilitate and provide the needed increase in continuity. The Working Group, after consultation with members of the Commission, should also be able to co-opt additional members, when necessary, to maintain wide and full representation and to deal with specific special issues that might arise.

Recommendation 4

15. The Commission welcomed the significant coordination already undertaken by UNSTAT and the international organizations individually and the Subcommittee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), but endorsed the view expressed by the Working Group in paragraph 30 of the report on its fifteenth session (E/CN.3/1993/21) that more could be achieved by the Subcommittee, and that the Subcommittee should find what changes it should introduce to allow it to become more effective. The Commission noted that the subsidiary machinery of ACC, including the Subcommittee, was currently being reviewed. The Commission also noted that the task forces established by the Working Group (see para. 40 below) would report to the Working Group but that, given the important role expected to be played by the task forces both in substance and in coordination, the Subcommittee should consider the work of the task forces and take advantage of it at its meetings.

Recommendation 5

16. The Commission endorsed the Working Group's view that a new structure was not needed for the Global Statistical System, but that approaches were needed that could build on the existing goodwill and enable the existing system to work more effectively. The Commission noted that the UNSTAT work programme included coordination of statistical work and that such a recommendation called on UNSTAT to place more emphasis on coordination and on support for the Commission. Given the range of responsibilities of UNSTAT, it was clear that priorities had to be set. The work done by UNSTAT under the programme was necessary for the promotion of coordination, but not sufficient. The System was characterized as having many centres, without a hierarchical structure and all the organizations involved had to work together. In that coordinating role, UNSTAT was seen as having a primus inter pares status. To support the coordination process, the Working Group had specified a number of instruments or tools to be developed and/or improved. The Working Group and the Commission noted that the arrangements for work on international trade and the revision of

the System of National Accounts (SNA) were good examples of successful approaches. The point was made that some of the coordination mechanisms in force in some national statistical systems might provide some guidance on techniques and mechanisms that might function well at the international level.

Recommendation 6

17. The Commission noted that some work in various fields had already been done by UNSTAT in cooperation with other agencies on assessing implementation and maintaining inventories of standards (see, for example, documents E/CN.3/1993/7 and E/CN.3/1993/15/Add.1, in which work related to economic classifications was reported). Other examples mentioned were the inventory of standards in the Directory of International Statistics and the inventory of classifications in use, the latter prepared by UNSTAT in cooperation with other agencies for the Conference of European Statisticians. In setting up a more complete system in this area, the Commission requested UNSTAT to take account of the following points: (a) a central file/inventory of international standards, classifications should be maintained and countries should be made aware of what was available; (b) in any monitoring it would be useful to know the incidence of standards being applied for national purposes and being applied for communication of data to international organizations; and (c) efforts should be made to find out (i) the extent of national adjustment of standards, (ii) the reasons for non-adherence or slow adoption of standards and (iii) problems in implementation. The Commission recognized that countries needed flexibility in the application of standards to meet their own needs. It was requesting that a monitoring system be set up to provide essential feedback to agencies which would be relevant to the provision of technical cooperation and to future revision of standards.

Recommendation 7

18. The Commission noted that the application of standards in flexible ways at the national level could have an impact on intercountry comparability of data. The point was made that the item might be clarified by referring to "generic methodological standards".

Recommendation 8

19. The Commission stressed the need for continuing efforts to reduce duplication of data collection from countries to supplement successes that had already been achieved. It endorsed joint approaches to data collection. It welcomed the existing tools that had been developed and were in use by the agencies, the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities and the Working Group to reduce duplication and share data. It endorsed the improvements requested by the Working Group, which included an improved classification of subject areas in statistics and the presentation of monitoring tools according to a subject-matter classification. Concern was expressed about different figures being published by different agencies reflecting adjustments made by some agencies.

Recommendation 9

20. The Commission, in its functioning, recognized the autonomous nature of the international agencies with their own governing bodies and recognized that its influence was achieved through moral suasion. Consequently, the term "authoritative advice" was understood as advice that was professional, impartial and informed, and therefore to be taken seriously into account by countries and international organizations in the development of their work programmes. The advice would in part be based on review of integrated work programmes, structured according to a classification of subjects, which would permit the identification of gaps and overlaps. The "allocation of statistical subjects" was not intended to exclude situations in which, in a particular field, one or more organizations might be active, carrying out work on different aspects or issues that were complementary to each other. That would also be made clear through joint work programmes. The Commission noted that reports were available to it at the current session according to an existing classification of subjects and that the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities would consider possible improvements to the classification.

Recommendation 10

21. The Commission considered that the role of the regional statistical conferences and regional statistical divisions was vital to the improved development of the Global Statistical System and its coordination. That System should depend upon and respond to regional influences. The point was made that national statistical services could help strengthen the regional statistical divisions through the provision of training facilities, for example. The Commission noted that in the Secretariat, as part of the restructuring in the economic and social fields, the extent of decentralization away from Headquarters in order to strengthen the role and increase the responsibilities of the regional commissions was being considered. The Secretary-General had indicated the restructuring would also tighten their links with Headquarters. The Commission requested the recommendation to be followed up through all available Secretariat and intergovernmental channels. The recommendation was understood as recognition of the authority and responsibility of the international agencies in their subject-matters at the regional level, and as calling for regional involvement in those subjects, where appropriate. The situation was similar to the relationship between those agencies and UNSTAT at the world level.

Decisions

22. The Commission took note of decisions 1-9 and made some additional comments on decisions 4 and 9, as set out below.

Decision 4

23. The Commission strongly endorsed the establishment of the six task forces by the Working Group and endorsed their terms of reference and the reporting arrangements that had been set up. The Commission urged all agencies to give the utmost priority and effort to the work of the task forces. The Commission took note of the information provided on the intended coverage and methods of work of several of the task forces and decided that additional information on

the progress of the task forces would be provided under the relevant agenda items. The possibility of establishing a task force on service statistics was considered and the Commission asked the Working Group to consider the matter further at its forthcoming session.

Decision 9

24. The Commission was informed of the details of the proposal of UNSTAT that had been endorsed by the Working Group in connection with decision 9; namely to (a) continue to collect, compile and disseminate nationally reported data; (b) supplement the nationally reported data with adjusted national data, where necessary and technically feasible, to make them more compatible with international standards, and prepare estimates for missing data, also where technically feasible, so that the adjusted national data and estimates were seen as complementary to reported data; (c) include in its databases adjusted data and estimates prepared by other international organizations with competence in a particular field, along with full citations and notes to explain the sources and avoid duplication of effort and proliferation of conflicting data; (d) maintain databases of reported data, adjusted data and estimates for missing data, each appropriately identified; and (e) disseminate data to users or provide a system for informing users of the availability and nature of available adjusted and/or estimated data. Such a policy would require that the methodologies for making adjustments and estimates should be methodologically sound and should be described, and that national authorities should be generally aware that international statistical publications might contain adjustments relating to national data for international comparability purposes as well as estimates for missing data. At the same time countries that had not reported data, or whose reported data had been adjusted, could be requested to provide comparable data if available.

25. The Commission took note of a concern expressed by the representative of India on the decision of the Working Group.

Action by the Commission

26. The Commission:

(a) Adopted recommendations 1-10 as set out in paragraphs 27-36 below with comments as set out in paragraphs 11-21 above;

(b) Took note of decisions 1-9 as set out in paragraphs 37-45 below, with comments set out in paragraphs 22-25 above;

(c) Bearing in mind the initiatives taken, as set out above, and as a pragmatic measure to give impetus to such efforts, decided to recommend to the Economic and Social Council that (i) the Commission hold a special session in 1994 of eight half days spread over five days, with a possible consequence that its regular session, scheduled for 1995, could also be reduced to eight half days spread over five days; and (ii) the Working Group meet annually for four days each meeting.

Recommendation 1

27. The Statistical Commission should consider requesting the Economic and Social Council to change the cycle of Commission sessions so that, depending on the need, annual meetings of eight half days spread over five calendar days could be held instead of a single session of eight full days every second year.

Recommendation 2

28. The Commission should decide, with immediate effect:

(a) To nominate officers for the following session at the end of a current session, with formal election at the beginning of the following session, to re-elect the same persons a number of times as officers and to provide for the officers to meet informally;

(b) To request the Secretariat to give a copy of the rules of procedure of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council to new officers and to consider drafting a popular version of the rules incorporating practical hints;

(c) To request the Statistical Division to invite chairpersons of regional conferences of chief statisticians to participate in the sessions;

(d) To request participants to present their reports to the Commission as documents or background papers and not as lengthy oral statements;

(e) To request the Secretariat to ensure that specific agenda items are well prepared and well documented through discussions and reports of the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities and/or the Working Group.

Recommendation 3

29. The Statistical Commission should decide with immediate effect:

(a) To recommend to the Economic and Social Council that the Working Group should hold one meeting a year, of four days' duration;

(b) To determine the membership of the Working Group at the end of each session of the Commission and give preference to newly nominated officers for the next session;

(c) To request the Statistical Division to invite the chairpersons of the regional conferences of chief statisticians to participate in the meetings of the Working Group;

(d) To request the Working Group to prepare short reports of its meetings and to ensure that the meetings mainly result in specific documentation for the Commission.

Recommendation 4

30. The Statistical Commission should decide with immediate effect:

(a) To request the Statistical Division and the agencies to place more emphasis on coordination matters;

(b) To request the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities to form ad hoc groups for special topics;

(c) To request the ACC Subcommittee to prepare specific documentation on appropriate issues for the Commission, through the Working Group;

(d) To request the ACC Subcommittee to ensure that reports on its meetings provided to the Commission were not lengthy.

Recommendation 5

31. The Commission should request the Statistical Division:

(a) To find ways to strengthen its role in serving the purposes and work of the Commission;

(b) To place more emphasis on coordination matters.

Recommendation 6

32. The Commission should request the Statistical Division, in cooperation with the statistical divisions of the regional commissions and other relevant agencies, to set up a system for monitoring adherence to adopted United Nations classifications, provide a description of the present situation on the adoption of classifications in the member countries and their relationship to adopted United Nations classifications, and submit a progress report to the Commission at its twenty-eighth session.

Recommendation 7

33. The Commission, at its twenty-seventh session should consider the following as a possible special topic for discussion at its twenty-eighth session, in 1995: "Advantages and disadvantages of more flexible standards (classifications and other elements), concentrating in the first instance on classifications for economic activities and commodities (International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities, revision 3; the General Industrial Classification of Economic Activities within the European Communities, revised; and other classifications)".

Recommendation 8

34. The Commission should request the Statistical Division and the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities to give continual attention to reducing duplication in collecting and processing data from member countries, and request a progress report for each session of the Commission, along the lines of chapter I of the inventory of statistical data collection activities (see

E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.7): the report (and the inventory) should be reorganized along subject-matter lines.

Recommendation 9

35. The role of the Commission should be to:

(a) Give authoritative advice on the allocation of statistical subjects to the agencies concerning statistical work, development/revision of standards and technical assistance;

(b) Give authoritative advice on the detailed agreements between the agencies on cooperation regarding the actual work to be performed.

Recommendation 10

36. The Statistical Commission should:

(a) Endorse the views of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination related to strengthening the role of the regional statistical divisions and conferences of chief statisticians in the activities of the Statistical Commission and within the global statistical community;

(b) Recommend that regional commissions establish or reinforce conferences of national chief statisticians, technically served by the respective statistical divisions;

(c) Recommend that the regional conferences of chief statisticians, working in close collaboration with the Statistical Commission, act as the focus of regional statistical development. In that role they and the respective regional statistical divisions should be involved in developing, revising, testing and implementing standards and in monitoring their application, as well as in coordinating technical assistance;

(d) Recommend that regional commissions strengthen their statistical divisions to raise the profile of statistical work within each commission's programme of work;

(e) Request specialized agencies, regional development groups and relevant United Nations bodies to cooperate to the fullest extent with the statistical divisions, especially in technical assistance projects;

(f) Request the Statistical Division and the regional commissions, within the context of the Secretary-General's overall restructuring of the United Nations system, to determine the optimal division of effort between Headquarters and the regions.

Decision 1

37. The Working Group decided that, for the 1993 session of the Statistical Commission, the Statistical Division should continue its informal practice of inviting chairpersons of regional conferences to attend Commission sessions.

Decision 2

38. The Working Group requested the Secretariat to develop proposals presenting several options to the Commission on how the Statistical Division might restructure its work programme to respond to these recommendations, including an indication of internal reallocations of resources that might be necessary.

Decision 3

39. The Working Group requested that the Statistical Division and the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities submit inter-agency planning reports on a subject basis, where feasible, to the Commission at its twenty-seventh session.

Decision 4

40. The Working Group identified six subject-matter areas where a need for review was considered a priority. The Working Group noted that task force mechanisms already existed for two of the areas, established new task forces for the other four and, with the agreement of the agencies concerned, appointed conveners for each of the task forces as follows:

1. National accounts (already existing; convener: Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts);

2. Industrial and construction statistics (convener: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development);

3. International trade statistics (already existing; convener: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade);

4. Finance statistics (convener: International Monetary Fund);

5. Price statistics including the International Comparison Programme (convener: Statistical Office of the European Communities);

6. Environment statistics (convener: Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat).

Decision 5

41. The Working Group requested the task forces established under paragraph 40 above to investigate ways to carry out the evaluations and to carry them out as far as possible.

Decision 6

42. The Working Group requested the task forces established under paragraph 40 to address the question of publications in the course of their review of the particular subject areas. In particular the Working Group requested the task forces to consider the review undertaken by the Conference of European

Statisticians, and set up a similar review. The Working Group specified that this review should primarily concern publications in printed or similar form, but the relationship with machine-readable forms of dissemination should be taken into account. The Working Group considered that it would be in a position to consider the matter further when it had received the task force reports.

Decision 7

43. The Working Group requested the task forces established under paragraph 40 above to carry out, in their particular subject areas, the two tasks described in paragraph 68 (a) and (b) of the report of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination on its fifteenth session (E/CN.3/1993/21).

Decision 8

44. The Working Group decided to bring its concerns relating to technical cooperation again to the attention of the Statistical Commission.

Decision 9

45. The Working Group endorsed the ideas set out in the report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.3/Add.1) concerning the Statistical Division's plans for continuing to collect, compile and disseminate nationally reported data and to extend its adjustment and estimation work to all fields in its responsibility as far as possible, in order to meet the wide range of user needs. The Working Group decided that these plans should be brought to the attention of the specialized agencies for their consideration.